

Learner Identity and Academic Literacy Skills' Acquisition

in Students at The University of Bolton

Sarah Telfer & Vivienne Newton

s.telfer@bolton.ac.uk

v.newton2@bolton.ac.uk

Department of Education & Psychology, University of Bolton, Bolton, UK.



Teaching Intensive, Research Informed



Teaching Intensive, Research Informed

What is learner identity?

Recent educational research defines learner identity as a 'relational, socially negotiated process'

The relational nature of identity means that individuals are not the sole constructors of their identity, that identity is no longer viewed as an entirely internal process. Rather, identity is co-constructed with interested others (Reeves, 2009).



Literacy & Social Transition

A continuous theme in research surrounding literacy is its link to class structure and the concept of education as a form of social transition.

"I can't talk to the people I live with anymore ... or them out there [academic friends at the university] 'cause I can't learn the language"
(Russell, 1981)

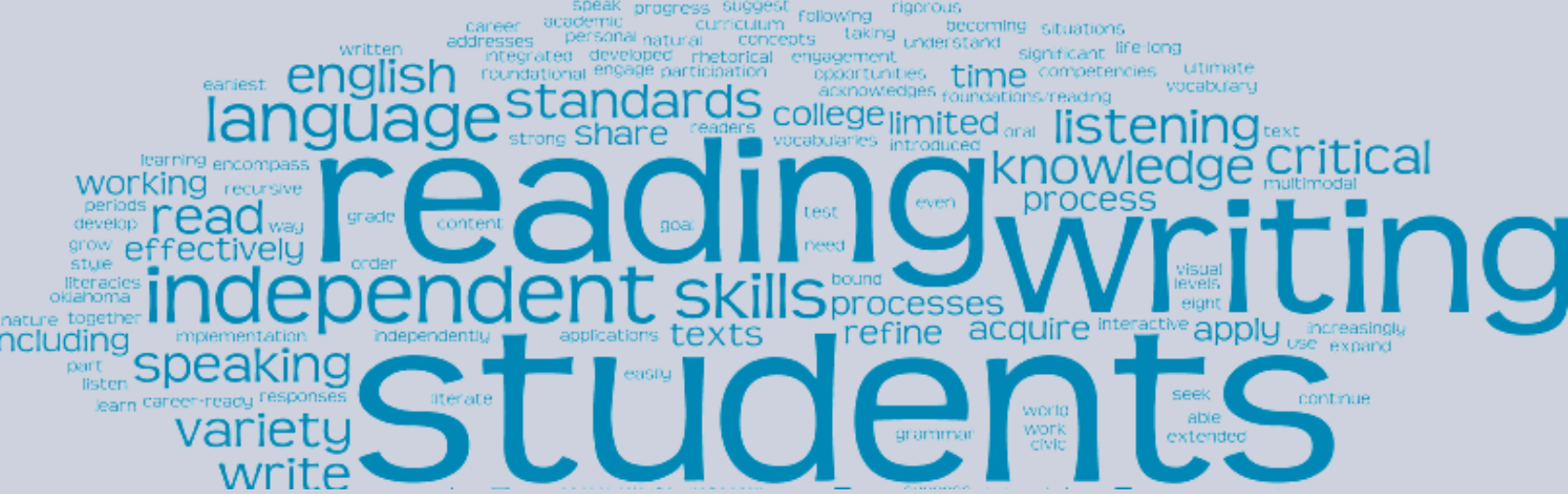


What is Academic Literacy ?

Waters and Waters (1992) discuss that being academically literate means to be competent in a range of metacognitive skills and to be able to apply these skills appropriately in the context of the learners' individual discipline.

Wingate (2015) states that academic literacy is a "communicative competence" (ibid, p. 6); learners must possess not only skills such as critical thinking, reflective writing, reasoning and problem solving but should be able to use these within an "academic discourse community" (Swales, 1990, p.21).

Lillis and Tuck (2016) discuss the need for academic assessment to embrace methods that recognise the identity of students from non-traditional backgrounds and value "different meaning-making resources, in terms of discourses, languages and language varieties"



Conclusions

Focus group discussion suggest that the inclusion of study skills forms "part of a broader process of personal, academic and professional development" (Cottrell, 2001, p.46). Incorporating skill development within subject teaching through use of the 'Academic Socialisation' or 'Academic Literacies' models may be more beneficial for students, but previous research highlights that these models can place unrealistic demands on lecturer's time.

The feedback obtained indicates that considering aligning student and academic staff expectations of the skills needed and focusing on developing independent learning would be a good starting point.

References

- Bourdieu, P. & Passeron, J.C. (1990) *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* London: Sage Publications.
- Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). (2014) *UKPIS: Widening participation of under-represented groups* [Online]. Available from: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/pis/09/10/urg> (Accessed 20 November 2015)
- Lillis, T. & Tuck, J. (2016) Academic literacies: a critical lens on writing and reading in the academy. In: Hyland, K. & Shaw, P. (eds.) *The Routledge Handbook of English for Academic Purposes*. Abingdon: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, pp. 30-43.
- Lowe, H. & Cook, A. (2003) *Mind the Gap: Are students prepared for higher education?* *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 27 (1), pp. 53-76.
- Reay, D., Crozier, G. & Clayton, J. (2010) 'Fitting in' or 'standing out': working-class students in UK higher education. *British Educational Research Journal*, 32 (1), pp. 1-19. Available from: [DOI: 10.1080/01411920903287925](https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920903287925) (Accessed 10 May 2016)
- Reeves, J. (2009) *Teacher Investment in Learner Identity*. Faculty Publications: Department of Teaching, Learning and Teacher Education. Paper 106.
- Russell, W. (1981) *Educating Rita* London: Samuel French
- Waters, M. & Waters, A. (1992) Study Skills and Study Competence: Getting the Priorities Right. *English Language Teaching (ELT) Journal*, 43 (3), pp. 264-73.
- Wingate, U. (2006) *Doing away with 'study skills': Teaching in Higher Education*, 11 (4), pp. 457-69.
- Wingate, U. (2015) *Academic Literacy and Student Diversity: The Case for Inclusive Practice* Bristol: Multilingual Matters

Who is the average University of Bolton Student?

UoB attracts learners of all ages from diverse backgrounds and many fall into the classification of 'non-traditional' students who do not possess the learner identity associated with those who typically progress to university.

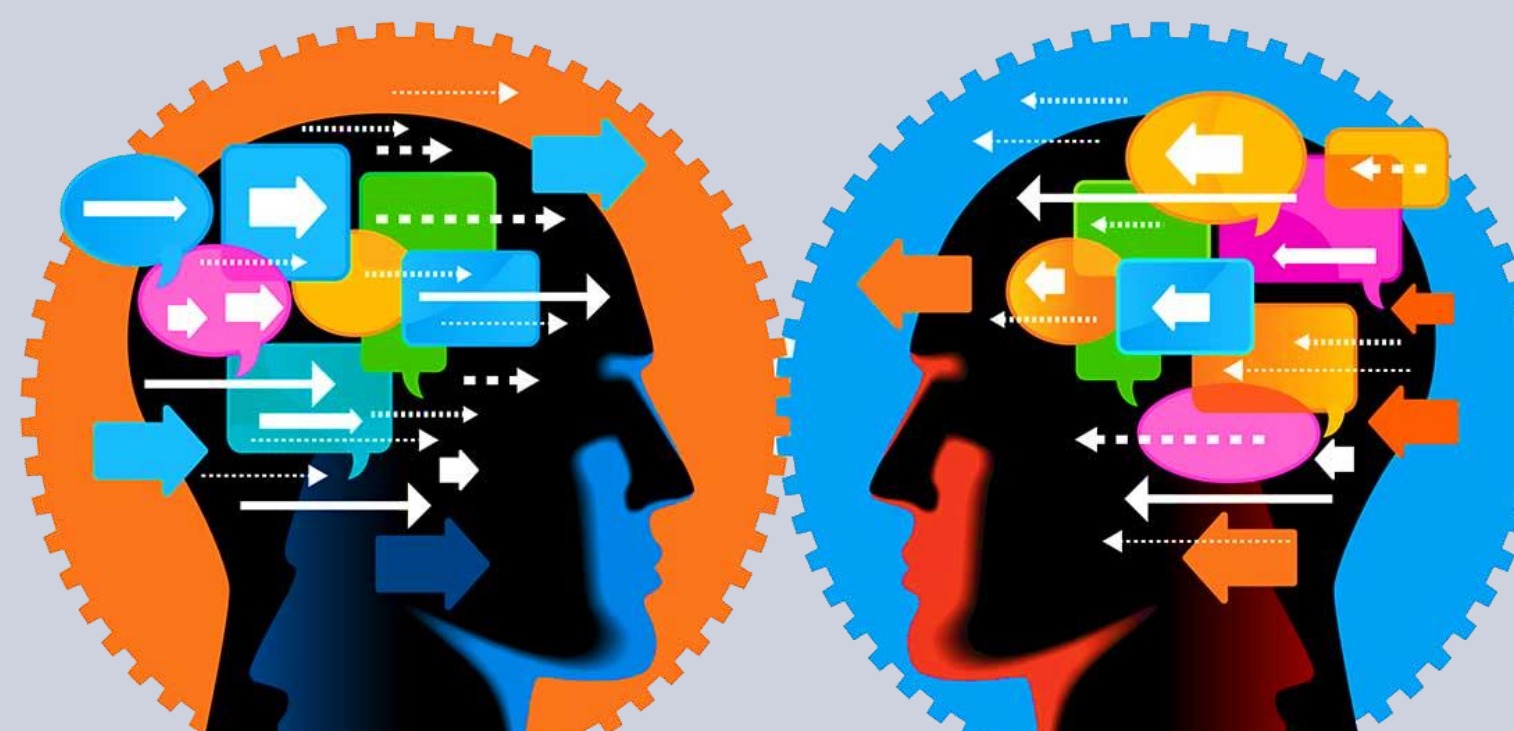
For the purposes of this study, a non-traditional student has been defined as a learner who has entered higher education after their 25th birthday or from a socio-economic class not usually associated with attendance at University.



Habitus

Habitus is not a fixed state but one which can transform when exposed to cultural, social, symbolic and economic exchanges within new social spaces or fields. (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

This suggests that, to enable those from non-traditional backgrounds to be successful in the transition into HE, attention needs to be paid to helping them negotiate the new experiences at the early stages and to adopt the necessary skills, including academic language and literacy, to enable them to develop a sense of belonging



Research Questions

With a mix of formal qualifications and experience in employment, University of Bolton students may have little knowledge of academic writing or the study skills needed to be successful in higher education.

- To ascertain the identity of learners at UoB including what social class they perceive themselves to be.
- To assess the extent that students arrive at the University prepared for the level of study expected of them and consider whether social background plays a part in this.
- To examine which of the current academic support services students are most aware of and consider to be of benefit.
- To analyse whether student background should be a factor in developing academic literacy and study skills provision for students



Qualitative Feedback

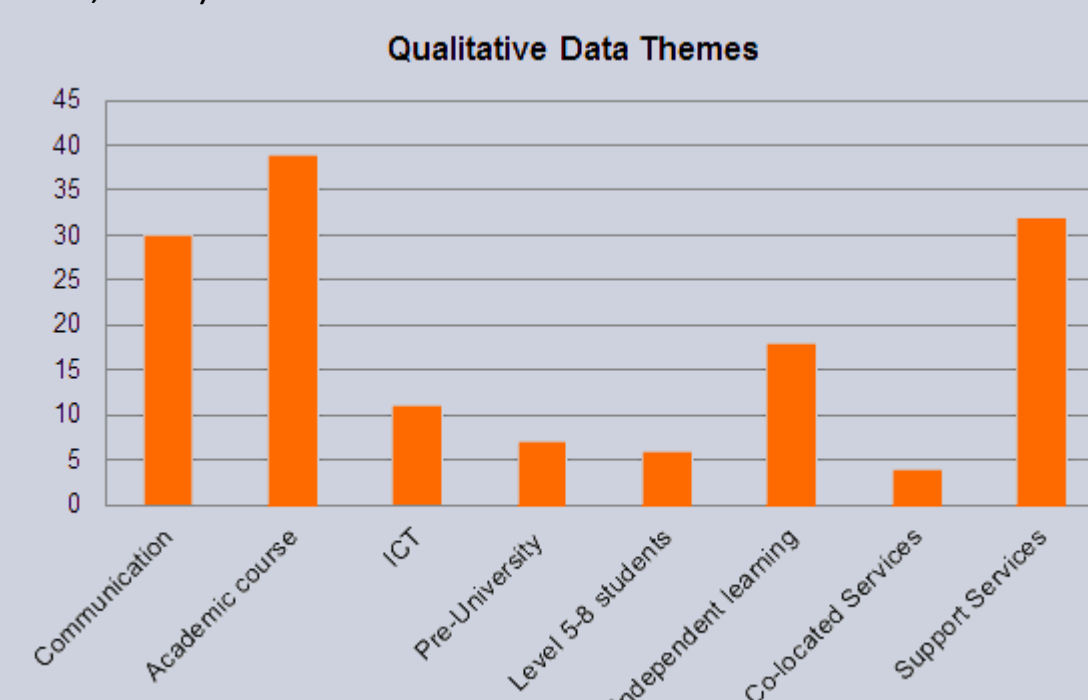
Learners were asked what was significant in their own development of academic literacy.

Academic course: Focus group discussion seems to indicate that only some subjects incorporate study skills in the course content, overtly at least.

Support Services: This theme considered services provided at the University following the Study Skills Model (Wingate, 2006). Generally, the respondents agreed that when they had engaged with the study support services available at the University, the experience has been a positive one.

Communication: It may be argued that those who emphasised being unaware of the support services available confirm the view put forward by Lowe and Cook (2003) that students are not sufficiently prepared for university life in that they do not appreciate that the onus is upon them to seek out opportunities to develop as independent learners.

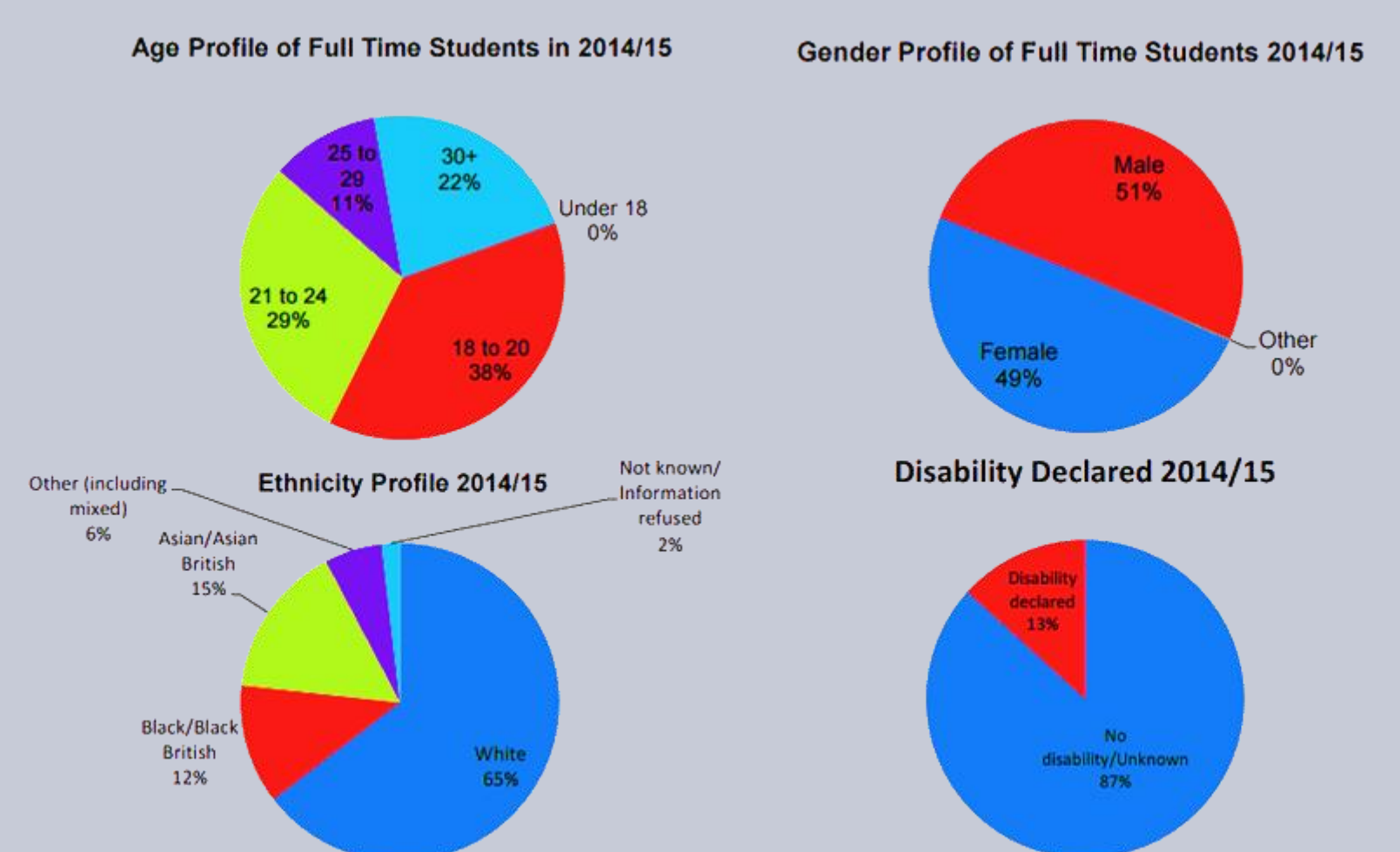
Independent learning: A number of students mentioned their own levels of confidence either with their academic studies or in general. This is likely to be because of the widening participation policies at UoB, which encourage students from diverse backgrounds to apply to university, but those students arrive without the social and cultural capital that makes them feel they belong (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).



Key statistics

- Female students make up the majority of part time students (66%)
- In 2014/15, 67% of full time students were aged 24 or less
- 9.9% of UoB full time undergraduate students were in receipt of Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) compared to 7.1% for England

Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), 2014.



Campus Dwell

Identified by Reay et al., (2010) universities, such as The University of Bolton, where a high proportion of students do not live on campus can lack a learning culture brought about by "institutional habitus" (ibid, p.11) and that there needs to be a balance between social and learner identity.

Therefore, engagement needs to begin early in academic life and develop from engaging students when coming into university for lectures.

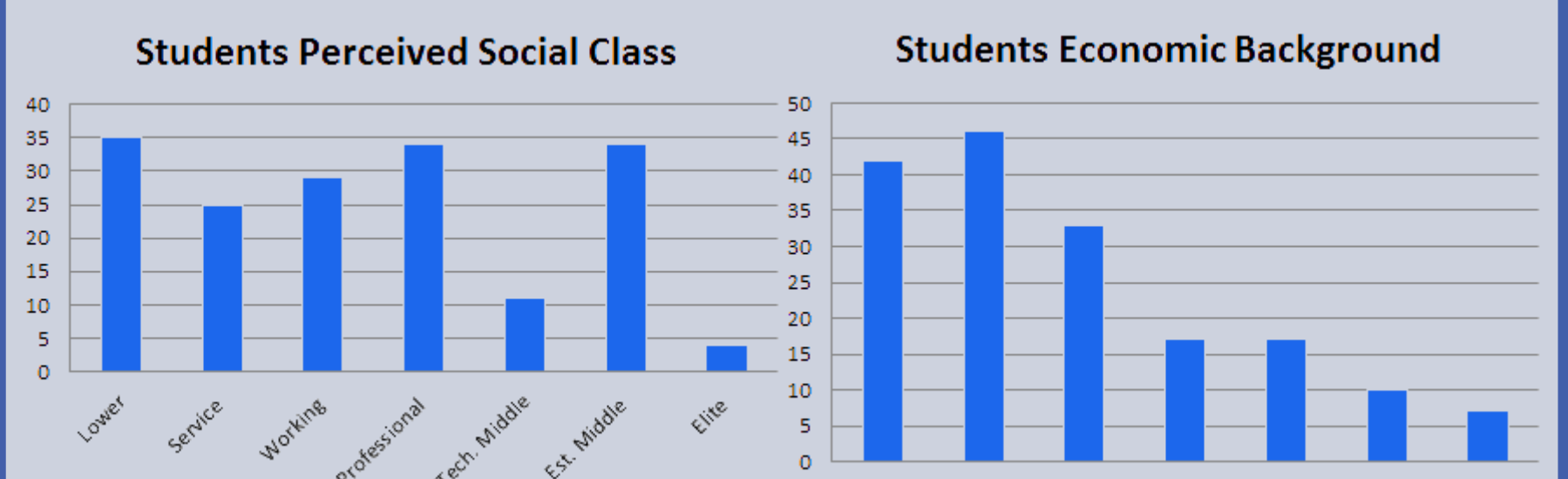


Socio-economic Identity of learners

26% of those participants who declared the occupation of their households main wage earner are in the NS-SEC Analytic Class 5-7 which is considered to be the less advantaged groups by the UK Government (The Deputy Prime Minister's Office, 2015).

Between 15%-20% of respondents matching themselves to each of the social classes, with the exception being only 2% defining themselves as 'elite' and 6% as Technical Middle Class. 70% of respondents indicated that their family income was below £25,000 and 40% said their income was below £15,000.

This may be an indication of the widening participation policy of the University attracting students from low income families or mature students who were the main income provider prior to returning to education.



Development of academic literacy

Economic background.

Only 39% of the £15-25,000 income bracket said they were happy with their current level of skills compared to 94% of the £30-40,000 group.

Age.

59% of the 17-24 age group (51% of the total participants in this age bracket) responded that they had found an informal support group, either face to face or via social media, helpful.

Social Class

Only 43% in the lower class agreed or strongly agreed that they were happy with their study skills.

Family and Friends Education

Of those who agreed or strongly agreed that attending study sessions had been sufficient in developing their academic literacy and study skills, 77% of respondents had a family member or close friend attend university.

